



## Chapter 9

# Sundancer

I think George knew the moment I had completed the first hot air inflation by myself that I would not be content to just be on a chase crew ever again. Within twenty-four hours after that fateful event he called me on the phone.

"Cal, Beth has decided to sell Sunflower. She's lost her job and needs the money."

I remembered having seen the balloon flying on the mesa. It was a Barns Firefly Seven which was the same make and size as Bright Future. The design on the envelope was a zigzag pattern of yellow and green bands that made it stand out sharply against the desert landscape. It was pretty.

"George, we can't afford a balloon," I replied, with the palms of my hands starting to sweat just thinking about the possibility.

"Why don't you come down and at least look at it?" he insisted. "I think it's a darn good deal and it won't last long."

I agreed, all the while thinking, "We really shouldn't be doing this." Judy and I piled into the car and went down to a local balloon repair station where the envelope was being worked on. It was love at first sight. The basket was pretty time-worn, but the envelope had only fifty-three hours of flying time on it. A support cable had been sheared somehow; other than that we could find no damage. In fact the envelope appeared to be in almost perfect condition. Judy and I walked up and down the length of the fabric stretched out on the floor and fondled the cloth, not saying much but looking at each

other from time to time. The design on the envelope started at the bottom with a brilliant yellow skirt and a horizontal zigzag band in yellow. The next zigzag band around the envelope was light green. The center band was a broad, dark forest green color. Then came another lighter green band, then a yellow band. The top of the envelope was dark forest green. It did remind you of a sunflower.

"Oh, Cal, it's just my colors," Judy spoke softly. She loved the earth colors.

"I know," I replied and looked over at George.

"I don't see any damage on the envelope and nothing that can't be easily fixed on the gondola," he said. "What do you think?"

We told George and Beth we would talk about it. We really couldn't afford a hot air balloon. I strongly suspect most people who own them can't afford them either. I could remember George kidding people about the fact that the first ride was free and the second one cost \$10,000. At least this one wouldn't cost quite that much. It was second hand and that helped. There was some small repair work needed on the basket, but it was airworthy and that was what counted.

It seemed like an impossible dream. During the two and a half years Judy and I had discussed buying a hot air balloon, we had tried to justify the cost many times. The problem was that no matter how we looked at it, owning a balloon was just not practical. We had covered every piece of rationale several times. For example, one reason we had started ballooning was because we were looking for a recreation that would involve everyone in the family. Unfortunately, just being on a chase crew had kept the children interested, so we couldn't use that for an excuse for buying a balloon. I also knew both Judy and our youngest son, Philip, wanted to learn how to fly, and the least expensive way to teach them was in our own balloon. On the other hand, renting a balloon for lessons wasn't as expensive as owning a balloon. We even figured out ways to earn money with a balloon. Then we talked to people who were trying to earn a living by flying balloons and found that the best you could hope to do was offset a few of the costs.

We spent the next twenty-four hours rehashing every possible reason to buy or not to buy the balloon. The entire family

was involved and the first night the talk lasted until early morning. As always, the only real major stumbling block seemed to be money. The next day Judy checked financing and found a banker who was as crazy as we were, but could we afford the payments? Of course, the answer was no. We were a staunch American family with the deep-seated ethics of work hard, save your money, and don't spend it on frivolous toys. How could anyone with any sense even consider buying a bag of hot air simply because it was fun to fly one? In spite of all the arguments against buying a hot air balloon, we ended every discussion looking at each other with the certain knowledge that just being on a chase crew was no longer enough. We all wanted to be able to fly our own balloon and share the joy with our friends. We would probably never find another bargain like the present deal. Faced with logic like that, what else could we do? We bought Sunflower.

It took another week to complete the arrangements and transfer ownership. Beth was tearful at the signing of the papers and gave us a gift of several pins of the balloon and a bottle of champagne adorned with green and yellow ribbons. We could see it was like giving up part of herself but, like selling a favorite horse, she knew Sunflower was going to a good home. Judy held my hand as we walked out the door. We had stepped over a line that was to change many years of our lives. I pinned one of the pins on her lapel before we left and it shone in the sunlight.

"It's pretty," I said as we walked toward the car with our arms around each other.

"Yes," she replied, rubbing the pin with one hand. "Most important, it's ours."

The following Saturday was our first flight. George had agreed to be my instructor, much against his better judgment, so he said. We didn't have any sort of a vehicle that would carry a balloon, so we borrowed a pickup from some friends in return for a promise that I would give them a ride when I had my pilot's license. The word had spread we had purchased a balloon and several people gathered around as we pulled onto the launch site.

"All right, everybody clear out this entire side of the field," the pilot for Cowboy Kazzoo said and waved the people out

from in front of the pickup. "It'll probably take all of it for Cal to launch in."

"Don't worry," someone else chimed in. "He'll be lucky if he figures out where the gas turns on."

All the kidding was good natured and several people gave us hugs as they stood around admiring the gondola. We drank in all the attention like proud parents, but soon it was time for launching and the people quickly drifted away to their own balloons.

"What are you going to name her?" Roy asked. He was one of our friends and he and his girl friend Charlotte were the start of our chase crew.

"Sundancer," I replied. "We decided we should keep part of the old name because of Beth's love for the balloon, and hot air balloons have always danced for me, so now we'll have one that dances in the sun."

I assembled the balloon under George's guidance. We carefully checked every inch of the system. Even though Sundancer was made by the same manufacturer as Bright Future, there were several differences between the two balloons. Certain valves were in a different position, Sundancer had an electronic temperature gauge, and the gondola was slightly bigger. There was also a difference in that now I was having to learn all the procedures well enough that I could eventually do them without any assistance. Small details took on a new perspective. As we unpacked and inspected the envelope and watched the bright green and yellow fabric unfold, it was hard to believe that we were finally inflating our own hot air balloon. I looked around at the family and it was like watching children who were seeing their first Christmas tree.

"It is even prettier than I remember," Judy said as she came up and slipped her arm around my waist.

The hot air inflation really went fairly smoothly considering I was much more nervous than the first time. I had had several days to think about all the things that could have gone wrong when I had inflated Bright Future. Still, I only banged my head once and the visions I had of getting tangled up in the support cables never occurred. I didn't even fall out of the gondola, flat on my back while the balloon went sailing off without me. Instead, when the envelope lifted off the ground,

the sun momentarily shown through the fabric and lighted the whole interior. Sundancer seemed to be saying, "Come waltz with me and the sky and the sun."

The flight went about as I had expected. We quickly settled into practicing things like controlled ascents, controlled descents, level flight, and landings. Since both Sundancer and Bright Future were the same size, the flying characteristics were similar. Of course, I was still a relatively inexperienced student, so there was the usual bouncing around and erratic altitude control problems while I learned the feel of the balloon.

It wasn't only the new balloon causing me problems. Any balloon responds differently depending on the combination of passenger weight, ambient temperature, etc. The problem for the pilot is that these factors change constantly as the flight progresses. The amount of lift depends on the difference in temperature of the air inside the envelope and outside the envelope. This means that as the outside, or ambient, temperature warms up slightly longer burns are needed to maintain the same altitude. However, as you fly higher, the outside air becomes cooler so it takes shorter burns and less fuel. The total weight to be lifted by the heated air also decreases as the fuel in the propane tanks burns off. Someone once said the complexity of the task was a little like trying to tie your shoe laces with a pair of chopsticks!

"Let's take her up about 2,000 feet and see how you do," George instructed. "Feed her about four to five second bursts until we are climbing about 300 feet a minute."

My gut tightened up a little because this was my first time to fly more than 200 feet above the ground, but I followed George's instructions and soon the ground was receding rapidly. We leveled off about 7,000 feet and then the fun started. I was supposed to keep the balloon within 20 feet of the prescribed altitude, but I found I was lucky to keep it within 100 feet. I had no way to judge the depth of field at this altitude. I couldn't feel the balloon start to drop until one or two seconds after it had started. Then I had to overburn to stop it and try to return to where the altimeter read exactly 7000 feet. This usually meant the balloon would rise far above the prescribed

altitude before I could stop it. We bobbed up and down for almost thirty minutes before George would let me descend to a lower altitude.

"I'll bet you thought you knew a little bit about flying a balloon," George jostled.

"You made your point," I admitted. George certainly had a way of keeping you from getting too cocky.

I knew Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) rules stated that each student pilot must receive a minimum of ten hours of flight instruction. I also knew it usually took over fifteen hours of instruction before a student was able to master these skills well enough to pass the FAA flight test for a private pilot's license. Today, I felt like it would take me fifty!

We flew about an hour and then George and I agreed that Judy and the kids should have rides. Judy and Laurlie were the first passengers and then Kevin and Philip had a turn. Finally it was time to stop for the day; we regretfully packed Sundancer back into the canvas storage bag and headed back for the launch site. People once again gathered around us and several bottles of champagne appeared.

"Come on, Cal, this time it will include you and all your family," George said. The tailgate was lowered on the pickup and the five of us gathered around the gondola. George turned to the crowd.

"Today is both a happy and a sad occasion," he said. "The Campbells have been on my crew for several years and have been the best chase crew any pilot could hope to have. None the less, I'm happy, because they now own their own balloon and we'll be sharing the days in a different way."

George turned to us and recited a variation of the balloonist's prayer,

"The winds have often welcomed us with softness,  
The sun has blessed us many times with its warm  
hands,

Now as you enter the golden days ahead, may you  
always fly so high and so well that God will  
join you in laughter,

And then set you gently back into the loving arms  
of Mother Earth."



With that he took a bottle of champagne and sprinkled a little on each of our heads and then on the gondola of Sundancer. The crowd broke and people gathered around, giving us hugs and kisses. I no longer worried about whether we had done the right thing in buying Sundancer. It may not have been logical, but it was right.

